CHRISTMAS EVE
DECEMBER 24, 2011

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I made a big mistake last week. As I was collecting my thoughts and rummaging through my Christmas files, I counted how many Christmas Eves I have tried to say something helpful. It's never a great idea to do something like that. I think I won't reveal the number, but suffice it to say that John F. Kennedy was the President when I preached the first time. And the challenge tonight is the same as it was for the first one – what possibly can anyone say that would illumine or enhance a story everybody already knows and loves enough to come to church to hear again.

Every year I used to express my dilemma at home and every year, for a long time my closest consultant and advisor told me essentially the same thing. "Stop worrying about this. We don't come on Christmas Eve to hear a sermon. We just want to hear the story, sing the carols, light a candle and get home at a reasonable hour." I didn't lament this year and she told me anyway – as I was working – "Remember, we just want to hear the story, sing the carols and light a candle."

She is in very good company, by the way. The distinguished America theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the most influential Christian voice of the 20th Century, wrote an essay once in which he explained that on Christmas Eve he and his wife avoided attending a church where there was likely to be a sermon. Instead, they chose a high, liturgical church, Roman Catholic or Episcopal, where the liturgy and the music carry the weight. No preacher is up to the task on Christmas Eve, Niebuhr said.

He was right, of course. Every preacher knows it. Every preacher would gladly just turn it over to the choir, which in our case, would be a very good idea. But this is a Presbyterian Church and Presbyterians don't feel as if they've been to church unless they hear a sermon. Far be it for me to violate that tradition, so here goes.

First, I am very glad you are here this evening. Sometimes on this occasion, the preacher can become a little feisty, look out at the full sanctuary and wish everybody a Happy Valentine's Day, Memorial Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving, because he or she knows he won't see them all again until next Christmas Eve. Not me. I've never said that and I wouldn't dream of saying it this evening. I'm glad you are here. If you never go to church during the year, this is the time to be here. The whole world stops on Christmas Eve, Frederick Buechner observes, to listen to a story it already

knows: believers and non-believers alike listen to a story, which if it is true, is the most important story in the world.

So, welcome. I'm glad you are here. And a thank you to the many people who make this evening possible: the staff of this church, particularly the house staff who clean and prepare the building for four worship services, pick up discarded candles. And our ushers, volunteers all of them, who devote their Christmas Eve to maintaining a bit of order here and helping seat more people than we have seats for. And if you are watching and participating by way of closed circuit television – a special welcome to you and a reminder that an important part of the story this evening is about there being no more room at the inn.

No event in all of human history has been the subject of so much art and music as the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Someone noted that if you could somehow extract the Christian story, particularly the Christmas story, out of Western civilization, particularly the art and music, there wouldn't be much left. The Christmas story has been painted over and over by the greatest classical artists. It has inspired some of the most sublime music ever composed. J.S. Bach's "Magnificat," George Frederick Handel's "Messiah," and the carols, the most beloved of all.

And it has inspired a unique tradition, the human attempt to come as close to the story as we can by re-portraying it, reenacting it, putting ourselves, literally, into it. St. Francis of Assisi was the first to organize and display the Nativity, using real people and animals, for the people of Assisi who evidently loved it. We have in our home a number of Nativities which we get out and look at and love yearly: simple ones, elegant ones, a tiny nativity with Navajo figures, another, olive wood carved by Palestinians trying to make a living in Bethlehem, a Central American set given to us by a priest friend, a modern glass Madonna and child and an elegant set of crystal Magi.

And, of course, the simplest and best reenactment, the Children's Christmas pageant. There is something just absolutely irresistible and wonderful about our children, dressed as angels, shepherds, wise men, sheep and cows, Mary and Joseph. There is competition, of course, for the lead roles and when you have a lot of children in your congregation you have a problem that is solved by expanding both the size of the flocks of sheep and the number of angels. When that is exhausted, pageant directors have to become creative and think up new characters and new roles. One year, in a former parish with a lot of children the director, for some reason, decided that there must have been hawks around the manger. And so a simple head piece with a beak was quickly devised and our youngest son was assigned the role of a hawk and was appointed to lead the line of little hawks to the manger – "head hawk" we called him. It was a proud moment.

This year, Derrick Rose and I both hit the jackpot at Christmas. He only got $94 million dollars. I got three granddaughters as singing angels at the Pageant at St. Mathias, who then reprised their roles earlier this evening in our pageant. I had two granddaughters as readers at Advent Lessons and Carols, and tonight, in addition to three angels, a granddaughter soloist, a grandson singer at 4:00 and a reader at 11:00, and at the 4:00 pageant, granddaughter Rachel, as the Virgin Mary. It just doesn't get any better.

We invest a lot of energy creating, for ourselves and our families, a perfect Christmas: everything done perfectly; the elegant decorations, the ornaments on the tree arranged symmetrically, cookies and cakes baked to perfection, tables set beautifully. Martha Stewart has created a whole industry of making a perfect Christmas, someone noted wryly, transforming routine household chores into domestic theater.

But, the fact is, the original Christmas was anything but perfect. In fact, like the Children's pageant, it was unruly, chaotic, a little out of control. One year we purchased a cardboard, assemble yourself Nativity thinking it would be a nice, not to mention, educational, project for me and our children, young at the time. So we sat at the kitchen table and opened the package and I read the list of simple instructions. The project did not go well: the figures were decidedly difficult to assemble and kept bending and falling over: the stable leaned to one side, the manger kept toppling over and cardboard Jesus kept falling out. A four year old son, who had learned in Sunday School that this whole drama had something to do with God, surveyed the chaotic disaster on the table and asked: "Where's God in this mess?"

Over the years of remembering that moment I have concluded that the four-year-old's question is the theological, philosophical question – "Where is God in this mess?"

The original was very messy. First, the messiness of an unplanned pregnancy and two families trying to figure out how to handle it in a time and place that regarded young Mary's pregnancy as a mortal sin, in some instances punishable by death: the mess of a hurry-up wedding and then, just as they are about to settle into their married estate, the summons to return to Bethlehem for a census: the complication of that journey, ninety miles south, five or six days. Joseph walking, Mary, now heavily pregnant, walking and riding on a donkey: the mess of a small town flooded with visitors, also reporting to be counted: the mess of an inn already filled, the only inn in town, and a kind inn keeper, seeing Mary's condition and Joseph's concern for his wife, offering the stable out back. At least there would be a roof over their heads and a little warmth generated by the animals.

And the mess of labor and birth, water and blood and a baby's first breath and cry, the man helping the woman, following her instructions, receiving the baby, wrapping him in the bands of cloth she had brought along, holding him, looking into his tiny face and gently handing him to his mother.

It was as messy as human life itself. That is precisely what we love so much about the story. We know this story; we understand this story at a level in us deeper than our intellects, our rational, scientific reason. We know and understand this story in our hearts.

The claim this story makes is astonishing . . . Almighty God born into human life, human history, in the same way every one of us was born. The omnipotent Creator of the universe in a helpless infant. Think for a moment about what that means: that Almightiness is vulnerable, that power is in helplessness, that strength is in weakness.

The philosophers dismiss it as foolishness. The theologians struggle to make sense of it. St. Augustine of Hippo, 4th Century Christian philosopher, late in his own life: "Man's maker was made man that He, ruler of the universe might nurse at his mother's breast." (see Garry Wills, *St. Augustine* p.139-140).

Think about what this story says about real power, power to change things, power to shape human history. Think about where real power is in this story. Caesar Augustus, Roman Emperor, powerful enough to command a census and force everyone in the world to move . . . and at the far end of that same story, two poor Jewish peasants, a man and a woman and a donkey. We know where real power to change human history was, don't we? And it wasn't the Emperor. It was that couple's new baby.

A great man died last week, Vaclav Havel, poet, author, political activist, in Communist controlled Czechoslovakia. Havel was responsible for inspiring the "Velvet Revolution" that brought down the communist state without a shot fired. He wrote an essay in the 1970's, "The Power of the Powerless" that challenged the absolute control of the communist government and asserted that real authority and real power began with the people, belonged to the people, not the party, not the state. He was accused of subversion, tried and convicted and jailed for five years. But the state could not control the power of his ideas and the government fell. Havel's motto was "May truth and love triumph over lies and hate."

That is what Christmas means: that love will always, finally, utterly, triumph over hate: that the truth, always, finally, will overcome lies.

And think about what Christmas means to us personally, right here, where you and I live and move and have our being. When, two generations later, the writer of the Gospel of John introduced the story of Jesus, he did so not with a birth story, but a stunning philosophic assertion. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome the light."

Every one of us, I suspect, has known darkness, or knows darkness of some kind this evening: the loss of someone dear to us; fear about what is going to become of us; illness, ; anxiety about our families, our nation, our future. There are many kinds of darkness. And the message of Christmas is that we are not alone in the darkness, not hemmed in by darkness whatever it is, because light has come. Douglas John Hall – "God is alongside you – in the darkest place of your darkest night" (*Lighten Our Darkness* p.4).

I'm thinking about a young man I know who just two days ago checked himself into a rehab facility and long-term addiction program. I'm thinking about the darkness of addiction – and the power of hope, the power of love, the reality of light shining in the darkness and redemption and new beginnings.

The invitation of Christmas – to you and me, and all of us, is to live out our lives in that light, to trust that God came in that baby and continues to come into life, the life of the world this evening, your life and mine, and when we live in that love, that light, no darkness will ever overcome it.

> In the beginning was the Word,
> And the Word was God
> In him was life and the life was the light of all people.
> The light shines in the darkness and
> the darkness did not overcome it.

Dear friends – that is the good news on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and every day.

Thanks be to God.